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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the prison education program established by Hagerstown Junior College (HJC) at the Maryland Correctional Training Center (MCTC). Although the first courses were offered at MCTC in 1969, it was not until late 1969 that cooperatively prepared guidelines were adopted by HJC and MCTC. An inmate screening committee, on which both the college and the correctional facility are represented, screens and selects applicants to the program. Currently, funding for the program is provided by Basic Educational Opportunity Grant funds and by the Maryland Department of Corrections. The actual educational program is designed to serve the wide range of individual inmate differences; several instructional strategies involving varied lengths of classroom work, size of courses, and instructional delivery techniques are utilized. Individual counseling and testing allow the college to address individual student needs and goals. Students agree to contract with the program to exhibit acceptable behavior, and continuation in the program is dependent upon successful execution of the contract. A campus-release program has been implemented, with an 84.5% success rate. While evaluation of prison programs is difficult it is noted that recidivism rates are lower for program participants, and that, overall, many inmates have acquired previously lacking basic skills. (Author/JDS)

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COLLEGE BEHIND THE WALLS:

Factors Influencing A Post-Secondary Inmate Education Program

A Paper Presented at the
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Introduction

Inmate education is not a new issue in the field of corrections. With the emergence of rehabilitation as the goal of incarceration, it has become a primary strategy in the treatment process. The reason is clear. The cycle which produces crime - poverty, sub-standard education, and lack of job skills - may be broken by education. If the inmate is prepared educationally for his return to society, he will be less likely to return to crime.

In recent years, there has been a re-assessment of education programs "behind the walls."[1] While most evaluations are supportive of what education has accomplished, criticism is leveled at the failure of educational programs to go far enough. Given the highly technical nature of contemporary society, a high school completion program or basic trade and technical education are not usually comprehensive enough to overcome recidivism.

The nation's post-secondary educational institutions have the potential to provide the comprehensiveness needed to combat recidivism. In a survey conducted in 1967,[2] Adams discovered that thirty-one state correctional systems were cooperating with post-secondary institutions in providing education for inmates. In the decade since the Adams survey, cooperation between corrections and post-secondary education has grown. Drury, in 1973, indicated that forty-one state systems had some form of post-secondary education in their correctional institutions.[3] Finally, Emmert, in 1976, reported that forty-six states now are participating in post-secondary education.[4]

A comparative analysis of the three studies suggests that the majority of the post-secondary institutions serving prisons are two year community colleges. The community colleges have taken the leadership in prison education for several reasons. First, the philosophy of the community college is to meet educational needs wherever they exist. Second, as community-based institutions, the colleges

consider the inmates to be part of their constituency. Finally, because the colleges are part of the community, they have a vested interest in breaking the cycle of recidivism.

One of the community colleges which entered the field of prison education relatively early is Hagerstown Junior College (HJC). In 1969, the college established a program behind the walls of the Maryland Correctional Training Center (MCTC). The purpose of this presentation is to describe the program and analyze those factors which have contributed to the success and continuity of the effort.

Variables in the Equation

The existence of college level programming within MCTC began simply from the friendship of two men; the Superintendent of the correctional institution and the Dean of Instruction of the college. Informal discussions led to the offering of the first few courses in 1969. However, the initial success quickly indicated the need to provide a formal structure for the program.

The guidelines which provide the current structure for the program were drafted in late 1969. Since they were prepared jointly by college and institutional staff, the guidelines can be reviewed and altered at the request of either HJC or MCTC. That the guidelines have been revised only once since their inception underscores the degree of cooperation existing between the college and the institution.

It is a primary concern of both parties that qualified inmates be selected for the program, that they succeed, and that the educational program contribute to their return to free society. To assure the desired outcome, an expanded version of MCTC's Classification Committee was designed to screen applicants.

The composition of the committee is critical. The classification personnel who are charged with making institutional assignments are present. Custody is represented; it is important to impress upon the inmate the need to conform with institutional and program rules. The college counselor is present to evaluate test data and to assess inmate records. A representative of the instructional program participates in the discussion to insure congruence of inmate goals and program objectives. Thus, all the functions of the college and the institution enter into a symbiotic relationship to insure both program and student success.

With guidelines promulgated and students selected, funding is the next critical variable. During the seven years of the program's existence, there have been four identifiable phases of funding. The first phase involved the Maryland Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (MDVR). Representatives of the MDVR office participated in the initial planning for the program, and for the first three years, MDVR monies were the primary source of student tuition. But, in 1973, a cut in vocational rehabilitation funding made it impossible for the local office to continue supporting the program.

The second phase of the funding involved the Maryland Department of Vocational Education. In 1973, a proposal was approved whereby Vocational Education - Disadvantaged monies could be used to pay tuition. This procedure continued through fiscal 1976. At that time, a change in the procedure for awarding disadvantaged funds reduced the amount of money available to an inconsequential level. What dollars remain are used in the prison setting.

The third phase overlapped the second. In 1974, incarcerated persons were declared eligible for the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant (BEOG). Inmates began to receive grants, and the initial interpretation permitted the use of BEOG grants to cover all educational costs.

The fourth phase began in July, 1976. The reduction of disadvantaged funds was accompanied by a new interpretation of BEOG. Basic grants can now supply only one-half of the educational costs of the program. Therefore, there was a shortage of funds. Fortunately, the Maryland Department of Corrections stepped in and provided an Operation Bootstrap grant to cover the shortage. Current plans call for continued funding from the regular budget of the Department of Corrections.

It is important to point out two other sources of funding. Throughout the history of the program, veterans' benefits have been available to eligible inmates. Approximately thirty per cent of the inmates in the program have made use of veterans' benefits. The second source is the self-funded inmate-student. It is possible for a student to pay his own expenses from personal or family resources. However, less than five per cent of the individuals who have been in the program have been self-funded.

In conclusion, if a generalization can be made, it would be that flexibility and cooperation have characterized the development and maintenance of the program. Those problems which have occurred have been approached in a collaborative manner focusing on the needs of the students. The result has been the continuing improvement of the program.

The Fatal Flaw - And How to Avoid It

In the preceding section, those variables which serve as a basic framework for the program were described. In 1973, Sylvia G. McCollum stated "The fatal flaw in all correctional education programs stems from the assumption that people who happen to share a common address - a prison - share educational aptitudes, interests, and needs ..."[5] This section will analyze the strategies adopted by HJC to avoid the fatal flaw.

The college began with the goal of structuring an educational system designed to serve the wide range of individual differences in age, levels of prior experience, aptitudes, interests, and learning styles of a group of people whose only common denominator was "serving time." The system produced a series of strategies.

The first strategy is to test all inmates entering the program. The instrument selected, the ACT Assessment Program, was chosen because the college has used the measure for some time and the resultant data base makes the measure an indicator of student achievement. Where appropriate, the inmate may be required to take a reading test and a mathematics placement measure. All of these activities serve one purpose - to obtain a complete picture of the inmate as student. The data becomes the inmate's educational profile and is placed in his educational file.

The educational file serves as the basis for the college's counseling program. A member of the college's counseling staff serves as inmate counselor, and he visits the prison on a regular basis; usually once a month. He reviews the educational files and meets with those inmates seeking assistance with academic matters or career decisions. Because an educational profile exists, the counselor can be of maximum use to the inmate-student. Testing and counseling thus combine to make it possible for the college to deal with the individual needs and perceptions of each participant.

Two strategies underlie the college's instructional program. First, if the inmate is to avoid recidivism, he must have a specific goal in mind upon release. The courses offered behind the walls are selected to foster three goals. First, the inmate should be able to transfer to a senior institution if he so desires. Therefore, courses which are generally transferable are offered.

Second, immediate placement in the work setting may be preferable to continued college. To realize this objective, courses are selected which enable the inmate to develop marketable knowledge. Finally, a majority of the inmates in the program need to perfect learning skills. The college provides courses designed to improve basic reading, writing, mathematics, and study skills.

The second strategy underlying the instructional program is an attempt to avoid conventionality. Too many programs imitate the worst of the public schools - students seated in orderly rows with the teacher safely isolated from the students by a large desk behind which the individual resides for most of the fifty-minute classroom hour.

HJC varies both the length of the class and the strategy of instruction. Large group lectures, seminars, individual laboratory work, library services, and tutorial activity have been used. The combination selected for a given course is dictated by the subject matter and the composition of the learners. Also, the length of class is not held constant. Some groups prefer the fifty-minute Carnegie unit; others find a three hour block of time necessary to master the basic skills. In essence, the college endeavors to focus on the nature of the learner population, keeping its delivery structure flexible.

The behavioral aspect of the college program focuses on the artificial nature of the prison environment. McWilliams suggests that educational programs in prisons should "encourage attitudinal changes within the inmate ... and ... provide the inmate with outside world identification."[6] The strategy adopted by HJC to realize these objectives was to design a contract which the inmate signs upon entering the program. His tenure in the program is contingent upon exhibiting the behavior required by the contract.

The artificial environment in prisons elicits behavior which is often detrimental to learning. Further, the behavior is considered antisocial by free society. Therefore, if the inmate is to profit from the educational experience and be ready for return to society, he must modify his actions and demonstrate that he can behave in a socially acceptable manner. The contract guarantees that acceptable behavior will result in continuance in the program and progress through the correctional system. Failure to modify behavior, on the other hand, guarantees removal from the program and inhibits progress through the correctional system.

In the five years that the contract has been used, less than ten per cent of the program population has been removed for contract violation. Further, only two antisocial acts have occurred in the educational setting. Thus, the contract has been an effective contributor to a social environment conducive to learning and rehabilitation.

A final item is worthy of mention. In the second year of the program, the college initiated a campus-release program as a heuristic device. The program is designed as a goal to which the inmate may aspire. Acceptance for campus release requires social behavior and academic achievement of a high order. The participants in the college release program receive a phased return to society. Both the rewards and dangers inherent in such action are obvious. The existence of the opportunity to return to society, however, serves as a powerful social control force within the prison. In that regard, it is an effective reinforcement of the contract.

In any semester, the number of inmates on college release varies from five to ten per cent of the total program population. To date, fifty-eight inmates have participated in college release with nine failures, for a success ratio of

84.5%. A failure is defined here as an escape while on college release or a behavior violation which results in removal from the program. Initial analysis suggests that the college release program is valuable as both an educational endeavor and a social control force.

In essence, the system fosters individuality and a sense of success and worth in the inmate. Further, it demands that he behave in a manner consistent with the norms of free society. The result is a simulation of free society and, to the extent that the inmate has internalized the new behavior, rehabilitation.

Evaluation: A Tenuous Overview

Evaluating a program "behind the walls" is a difficult undertaking. The trap of simply recounting statistics is attractive. In the seven years of the HJC/MCTC program, 316 inmates have participated in the program. They have amassed an average of twenty-three credits during their tenure. The grade point average of the students is commensurate with the campus population for the same time period. These statistics indicate only that the program is serving a group within the college's community.

Recidivism is another traditional issue raised when evaluation is discussed. Preliminary analysis of the participants in the program reveals two things. First, it is very difficult to locate paroled participants. Second, for those that can be found, the recidivism rate is lower than the state average. Of those traced, somewhat less than one out of every three has been re-incarcerated, while the Maryland average is approximately seven in ten. The conclusions of the 1973 NewGate project report are germane here:

> Recidivism ranks poorly as an indicator of college program effectiveness in lowering criminal behavior because:
> 1. It is conceptually a poor index of criminal behavior.
> 2. It is an insensitive measure.
> 3. It is contaminated by factors and measures other than criminal behavior.[7]

Still, the problem of recidivism remains. Unless a program is able to control all the variables inherent in the return to prison syndrome, it is unproductive to expect it to modify the syndrome.

What, then, can be said regarding the success of the program. Perhaps, it is most accurate to say that after seven years some of the participants in the program have used it to change their lives. A great many of the inmates have far better learning skills. Some have achieved a significant place in free society. Still others are in the process of seeking that place. In our voluntarist society, very little else can be said of any educational endeavor. The opportunity has been provided - some have taken advantage of it.

Conclusion: Where Do We Go From Here?

There are numerous recommendations which might emanate from the foregoing presentation. We will list only the four areas where change is critically needed.

First, the analysis of funding patterns provided above suggests one thing - inconsistency. When examined from the perspective of the cost of incarceration, educational programs are a great bargain. It would be both prudent and productive for state correctional departments and the federal government to invest in education to combat the recidivism cycle.

Second, facilities for education "behind the walls" are less than ideal. Often, they actively hinder the learning process. For rehabilitation to work, it must be more than a polite phrase. Facilities and equipment compatible with the task to be accomplished will do much to make rehabilitation an achievable objective.

Next, post-secondary prison education has grown rapidly in the past decade. Yet, it has grown in a disjointed manner. Perusal of the studies analyzing its

growth reveals that there is very little articulation among programs or between programs and those societal agencies designed to continue the rehabilitation process following release. More attention to integration of effort could assist, significantly, in lowering the recidivism rate.

The final recommendation captures the essence of the problem facing prison education. The HJC/MCTC program was a grass roots effort. There was little involvement from the state correctional system or the community, itself. It seems that society would like to forget the inmate once he is incarcerated. Yet, this short-sighted attitude is responsible for most of the problems besetting prisons and prison education, today. Until society is willing to assign attitudal modification in the offender a high priority, prison education will remain, at best, a control but not a cure. As Cicero so cogently said "Crimes are not to be measured by the issue of events, but from the bad intentions of men." - including those who will never see the inside of a prison!

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